

REMYTHOLOGIZING GOD FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN THEOLOGY

A Professional Project  
Presented to  
the Faculty of the  
School of Theology at Claremont

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Ministry

by  
Keith A. Banks

May 1992

**c 1992**

**Keith A. Banks**

**ALL RIGHTS RESERVED**

*This professional project, completed by*

Keith A. Banks,

*has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty  
of the School of Theology at Claremont in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of*

**DOCTOR OF MINISTRY**

*Faculty Committee*

Cornish R. Rogers

D. Sung Park

\_\_\_\_\_

May 15, 1992  
Date

Ally J. Moore  
Dean

## ABSTRACT

### Remythologizing God for African American Theology

Keith A. Banks

Christianity in the African American community has the potential to either liberate and transform society or simply maintain the status quo. This study examines whether the process of remythologization of the concept of God would be useful in aiding African Americans to form the church into a more suitable vehicle for economic, social, political and spiritual emancipation. Although the study recognizes the ethnocentrism involved in African American theology, the need to draw from the plural elements of society is considered a necessity. African American theology must be a unique and authentic expression of the hopes, aspirations and needs of the African American community, developed within their particular cultural context, while at the same time remaining open to the ideas and promulgations of the global community.

There must be a significant difference between the messages of the African American church theology and the white Western church theology which is grounded in an ahistorical, semitic understanding of the concept of God. This requires a church institution that is not dependent on the ideology,

finance or scholarship of white Western theology. African Americans can only interpret the past in terms of the present; and the immediate facts hold no justification for tenaciously affirming past theological propositions upholding a God who is transcendent, all-powerful, all knowing, omnibenevolent and overwhelmingly concerned about the plight of the oppressed.

If God is to be useful to the majority of African Americans, then the character of God must be remythologized. Chapter 1 illustrates that Christianity, as it was transmitted to African Americans, was never intended by the slavemaster to serve as a liberation mechanism for the slave. Chapter 2 shows some early attempts by African Americans to remythologize the Christian message. Chapter 4 describes a limited description of contemporary African American conceptions of God. Chapter 5, considering the history as well as the present condition of African Americans in American society, provides the basis for a remythologized synthesis. This synthesis includes the need for incorporation of scientific thinking in order to provide a more rational basis for African American theological thought.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to my wife Mary who has been an enthusiastic and captive audience during the writing of this project. Thanks are also due to my parents, Dr. and Mrs. Eugene Banks, who believe that education for Blacks is at least a possibility.

This study is dedicated to my children Ryan, Danielle and Keith II.

## Table of Contents

Chapter	Page
1 Introduction . . . . .	1
Statement of the Problem . . . . .	9
Importance of the Study . . . . .	10
Definitions of Major Terms . . . . .	11
Hypotheses . . . . .	19
Work Previously Done in the Field . . . . .	20
Scope and Limitations . . . . .	25
Procedure for Integration . . . . .	26
2 African Influences on African American Christianity . . . . .	28
The African Connection with Slave Religion .	30
The Early Slave Church . . . . .	33
Magic, Culture and Radicalism . . . . .	41
Radicalism and the Slave Community . . . . .	44
Christianity and Rebellion . . . . .	50
Chapter Summary . . . . .	53
3 Reaction: The Prevailing Posture of African American Christianity . . . . .	56
Shaping African American Theology . . . . .	56
White Oppression and African American Theology . . . . .	60
Accommodation and Radicalism . . . . .	62

Chapter Summary . . . . .	66
4 God Mythology in the African American Church . . . . .	69
5 Conclusions and Implications for Further Study . . . . .	79
Pluralism and African American Theology . . . . .	79
African American Theology, Science and a God of Power . . . . .	82
A Remythologized Vision of God . . . . .	89
Implications for Further Study . . . . .	92
Bibliography . . . . .	95



## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

Beginning with the institution of slavery, African Americans were forced to participate in a constant struggle to define their existence in terms of the Christian religion as it was transmitted to them by white Americans. Millions of Africans were torn from family, political, economic, cultural and religious ties, and deposited in the institution of slavery. The new African American found, in the Christian religion, one of the few methods of self-expression acceptable to their captors. It was therefore necessary for the African American to remythologize the Christian faith in order to provide an authentic mode of expression and interpretation of slave life in America. The new Christianity among the slave population was in essence very different from the Christianity of their captors. However, the white origins of African American Christianity should not be discounted. The institution of Christianity among the slaves was developed in response to oppression. It may therefore be determined that white Christians were major characters in the development of African American Christianity. Despite various attempts by African Americans to develop Christianity into an authentic and uniquely Black experience, white Americans nevertheless

remained in partial control of this major generator of African American thought and expression.

A major justification for slavery in America was provided by the Christian religion. Christianity forwarded the self-serving argument that it was better to enslave the Black Africans and bring them into the knowledge of Christ than to leave their immortal souls to perish in pagan Africa.<sup>1</sup> It was also determined by the religionists of the day that this same Christianity had the potential to make the Africans better slaves. Christian preachers were swift in pointing to the benefits of acquainting the slaves with the proper portions of Christianity that supposedly defined the superior and inferior relationship of masters and slaves respectively, in order to make the African Americans better suited for their task. This Christian faith, transmitted to the slaves in western slavemaster's baggage, may have been far from the intention of the original Christian writers. In fact, the faith transmitted to the slaves by their owners was intended to function as a negative witness within the slave community. For this reason, the slave population was obliged to embark on the process of remythologization of the tenets of the faith in order to form the Christian religion into workable and authentic expressions of the African American community of

---

<sup>1</sup> Cancellor Williams, The Destruction of Black Civilization (Chicago: Third World Press, 1974), 263.

faith.<sup>2</sup> A certain amount of syncretism is in evidence in the melding of Christianity with various elements of traditional African cultural and religious traditions. The religion that emerged was a religion that was on the one hand uniquely African American and on the other hand, a direct expression of African American reaction to the oppression of their masters. The starting points of African American theology therefore became suffering, the acceptable responses to suffering and oppression found within the framework of the newly emerging African American culture.

There is general disagreement about the uniqueness of the contemporary African American religious experience. Examples that characterize the continuing debate between Henry Mitchell, C. Eric Lincoln and Joseph Washington and others will be documented in this paper. The debate takes on particular relevance when one realizes that the Christian religious institution has provided the major impetus for the African American response to the total world situation. If it is true that white Western Christians were instrumental in transmitting the Christian faith to African Americans, and white Americans were also responsible for determining the acceptable responses to their own oppression within the framework of the Christian experience, then the African

---

<sup>2</sup> Henry Mitchell, Black Preaching (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), 55.

American response to white racism and oppression is rooted in a miscegenation that may not necessarily serve the best interest of the African American community.<sup>3</sup>

Christianity, for the most part, has developed independently from the consideration of African American oppression. In fact, rather than try to alleviate the sufferings of African Americans, it seemed more profitable to white Christians to use the Christian religion to justify the plight of the oppressed. According to James Cone, "No white theologian has ever taken the oppression of black people as a point of departure for analyzing God's activity in contemporary America."<sup>4</sup> This white theological response is probably no less than normal human behavior. It was not considered economically nor socially sound for the white Christian to champion the cause of the oppressed. The oppressors could not address the plight of the oppressed without standing diametrically opposed to the Americanism that they wished to advance. To speak in favor of the oppressed would be to speak against the favored class. "By defining the problems of Christianity independently of the black condition, white theology becomes a theology of white oppressors, serving as a divine sanction for criminal acts committed against black

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>4</sup> James H. Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1970), 31.

people."<sup>5</sup> The Christian love ethic and the favored status of the American white Christian served as effective tools for assuaging guilt and suppressing the African American masses.

What was needed then may be little different from today's needs: a theological expression emerging from the context of the African American life experience. If the African American church is to be a relevant institution in the twentieth century, an uncommon method of interpreting the African American life situation from a theological perspective must be developed by African Americans who are not necessarily bound by the shackles of traditional Christianity.

So the down-home church was not irrelevant to the needs of Black people, but it met those needs only partially and superficially because essentially it was but a slight modification of the white church; it taught black people that they had been saved by a white Jesus because of the love of a white God. It could not come to grips with the black man's powerlessness. The white man's church and religion are designed to meet his needs, not ours. We cannot borrow a church which meets our needs from the white man. The white man's church is inescapably an instrument for the preservation of white power. The black church must be something different--separate and apart from the white church because black people and white people have different needs.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>6</sup> Albert B. Cleage, Jr., The Black Messiah (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1971), 100-14.

African Americans can no longer rely on white theologians to form theological perspectives for the African American community. According to Cone, "Even those white theologians who try to write books about black people invariably fail to say anything relevant to the black community as it seeks to break the power of white racism. They usually think that writing books makes them experts on black humanity."<sup>7</sup>

The African American Christian experience has been in a process of evolution since its inception. According to Albert Cleage,

The Black church is in the process of being reborn, and we are participants in that tremendous beginning. It's hard to be a black man in a white man's world. But if you don't have a black man's religion and if you can't be a part of a black man's church, it's almost impossible.<sup>8</sup>

The manner in which the African American community develops its theological perspectives in response to American society, as well as in spite of American society, may well be the most important set of events in the history of the African American people. Much of the history and rationale that led to the remythologization of American Christianity by African Americans has been forgotten in the African American

---

<sup>7</sup> Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, 31.

<sup>8</sup> Cleage, 179.

community. And this is a task that can only be performed by African Americans. While such a statement may arouse controversy, it is also noted that no such dilemma occurs when it is acknowledged that as an African American male, the possibility of doing relevant feminist theology probably does not reasonably exist. Further, the possibility of an African American developing a theology that is relevant to first generation Koreans is probably not in the visible future. It should also be of little surprise to believe that the theological task of the African American church community must be accomplished by African Americans. Surely, resistance to this idea will be encountered. Nevertheless, there can be no group more inherently qualified for the task than African Americans. Only the "powerless" African American is able to advance the position of the suffering African American community in a manner that is meaningful to both oppressed and oppressor. Only the African American can explain the underlying reasons for acts of violence that often seem meaningless to the rest of society. While working in Chicago, Martin Luther King noted that violence, "is the desperate, suicidal cry of one who is so fed up with the powerlessness of his cave existence that he asserts that he would rather be dead than ignored."<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community? (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 63.

There can be no doubt that the African American response to suffering and oppression led to an African American method of interpreting the Christian religion. A major question is, "To what degree did white American culture inform the African American response to oppression and suffering?" Since the African American culture is so inextricably linked to the culture of white America, it is not possible to assume that the African American theological response developed independently of white cultural and theological thinking of the day.<sup>10</sup> This did not preclude African Americans from formulating a theological response that was particular to the African American people. According to C. Eric Lincoln, "Those who attempt to reduce black religion to nothing more than a cryptonym for the prevailing white expression of the faith run the inevitable risk of exposing how little they know about religion, or black people, or both."<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, the interaction of the two cultures must be acknowledged as significant. To deny that the white theological and cultural experience influenced African Americans may be an even greater risk. Slavery was a recognized method of spreading the gospel, and it was a Christian responsibility of the slaveholders to provide for

---

<sup>10</sup> Mitchell, 57.

<sup>11</sup> C. Eric Lincoln, ed., The Black Experience in Religion (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press, 1974), 1.



the evangelization of the heathen slaves. It may be possible that much of the slave mentality, nurtured by the evangelical colonists, remains as an integral part of contemporary African American society.

#### Statement of the Problem

The central problem of this study is to determine whether Christianity, as transmitted to the African American community, should be remythologized in order to provide a suitable climate for the transformation and liberation of society.

Questions arising from this problem were:

1. Is there a significant difference between the African American and white Christian thought?
2. Is there a need for African American religious institutions that are totally separate from the institutions of other cultures in order for African American liberation to take place?
3. Are African Americans able to formulate an African American theology independent of white theological thought?
4. Does the Christian faith possess the potential for positive growth and development within the African American church community?
5. Is African American Christianity based on a pathological form of religion developed by white society?

### Importance of the Study

The decision to attempt this study was based on the following considerations:

1. Historically, the African American church community has been the major social and intellectual force among African Americans. The influence or lack of influence, of Christian thought on African America will lend a particular shape to the development of society. That influence should be studied.
2. There may be a relationship between Christianity and the inordinate degree of African American suffering.
3. If the African American church exhibits the same decline that is evidenced by those white churches that are resistant to fundamentalism, then the most important institution in the African American community may be in danger of extinction.
4. The African American church has historically been a major institution for combating racism in America. Whether Christianity provides an adequate arena for the continuation of the struggle should be questioned.
5. Unless the African American church is able to become unconditionally and irrevocably committed to the purpose of liberation of the African American, the church should be abandoned as a useless institution.
6. The questions raised in this study will provide a

basis for continuing research on this topic.

7. This study may prove valuable in providing workable ideas for the restructuring of African American church theology.

8. If the Christianity that is currently promulgated by African American churches is endemic to white western thought, a new theology, emerging from the context of African American experience may prove more effective in the transformation and liberation of the African American community.

#### Definitions of Major Terms

1. Fundamentalism. This writer is well aware that many definitions of fundamentalism have been rendered by such writers as Martin Marty and Henry Mitchell. However for the purposes of this project, fundamentalism is a Christian belief system usually associated with professing Christians who consider themselves somewhat right of center. This system is characterized by a rigid belief that the Bible is inerrant and infallible. For the purposes of this study, fundamentalist Christians will include all of those persons who identify themselves as fundamentalists, as well as those persons who belong to such groups as the Charismatics, Apostolics, various individual Baptist congregations, Jehovah's Witnesses, Foursquare, Pentecostal groups, and other such fellowships located within the United States.

This list is by no means considered to be all inclusive. Further, the word fundamentalism has little to do with adherence to the fundamentals of the faith since most of the aforementioned groups have differing interpretations as to what the fundamentals of the faith should be. Fundamentalism shows a marked concern for the preservation of an anthropomorphic, ethnocentric individualism, in addition to concern for the preservation of the biblical interpretations that each individual fellowship considers essential to the understanding of the inerrant, ancient biblical mandates. Most importantly, this group professes a belief in strict, literal interpretations of the Bible.

2. African Americans. The recently updated term for Black Americans which seeks to link the cultural heritage of Blacks in America with Blacks in Africa. The two terms, African American and Black people may be used interchangeably in this project.

3. African American Church. This is intended to include all of the professing African American Christians, regardless of denominational affiliation.

4. Survival Christianity. Survival Christianity is the churches method of coping with intolerable conditions. Survival Christianity is designed primarily to reduce the pain of suffering while at the same time maintaining the status quo. For purposes of this discussion, survival

Christianity stands in sharp juxtaposition to positive social and spiritual advancement. However, the issues of survival must be addressed before the issues of liberation. Rather than the struggle on earth for the betterment of societal conditions, the survivalist Christian is usually content with the promise of fulfillment and reward resulting from the promise of a biblical eschatological event. A recurrent survivalist theme is "When we get to the other side." This is a form of survival. The Black church, in the words of Alfred B. Cleage, is designed, "to help you feel good and release some tension is meeting at lease some need."<sup>12</sup>

The purpose of the Sunday morning African American church experience often provides little more than a release of the emotional tensions resulting from white racism perpetrated against African Americans during the previous weeks.

5. Remytholozation. To the best of this writer's knowledge remytholozation is a new word. Remytholozation involves creating a new myth by using the old myth as a thesis, the contemporary socio-cultural, political, economic and theological positions as antithesis, thus forming a new myth which represents a synthesis. This process is proposed for the African American church for the purpose of making its

---

<sup>12</sup> Cleage, The Black Messiah, 100-114.

theology more meaningful. Unlike Bultmann's demythologizing, the remythologizing that this writer proposes does not begin with the elimination of, "the conception of the pre-existent Son of God who descended in human guise into the world to redeem mankind....and nobody hesitates to call this doctrine mythological"<sup>13</sup> According to Bultmann, "For modern man the mythological conceptions of eschatology, of redeemer and of redemption, are over and done with."<sup>14</sup> Remythologization rejects this idea. Remythologizing in the African American Church does not accept the modern world view as a starting point for doing theology. Remythologizing God for African American theology must go back to where the books began. The modern worldview of Bultmann's existentialist theology of 1958 is now out of date in many respects. Remythologizing accepts the notion that there are lessons to be learned from every epoch of history. Remythologizing further realizes that our post modern models of science have taught us that consciousness represents only a small portion of the actions that can be apprehended in the world.<sup>15</sup> Remythologization believes there is no absolute truth.

---

<sup>13</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, Jesus Christ and Mythology (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1958), 17.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>15</sup> See Alfred North Whitehead Process and Reality, eds. David Ray Griffin and Donald Sherburne (New York: Free Press, 1978).

Science, theology and other disciplines only provide models which are many times incorrect. Remytholozation accepts the concept of antifoundationalism. Truth is in a constant state of flux. Remytholozation attempts to rescue the permanence from the flux while maintaining an open environment for change. Until such time as the cosmology is completely understood, the mythological models of science and religion and philosophy must constantly be subjected to some sort of continuing modification. This writer suggests that the modification include remytholozation. Unlike Bultmann, this writer believes that we can learn from the very myths that Bultmann would have discarded. Remytholozation connects old myths to what is post modern and rational. Remytholozation recognizes that the modern epoch of Bultmann has long passed.

6. Myth. According to this writer, the word myth does not necessarily mean untrue. Neither does myth have to be an accurate representation of the facts. According to Alfred North Whitehead, "The myth explains the purpose both of the ritual and of the emotion. It is the product of the vivid fancy of primitive men in an unfathomed world."<sup>16</sup>

However, Bultmann reminds,

These Mythological conceptions of heaven  
and hell are no longer acceptable to  
modern man since for scientific thinking

---

<sup>16</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, Religion in the Making (New York: Macmillan, 1961), 475.

to speak of above and below in the universe has lost all meaning, but the idea of the transcendent God and of evil is still significant.<sup>17</sup>

7. Church Theology. Unfortunately, there has been a sharp distinction between the theology of the church and the theology of African American academia. However, all African American theology has roots in the Black experience. Remythologization is an attempt to do theology from the bottom up, rather than from the top down. The theology of African American academia must become strongly related to the theology in the pews. African American church theology draws from the total African American experience whether it occurs in or out of the church house. In remythologized African American church theology, the total experience of African Americans must be brought into focus. Remythologized African American church theology is not concerned strictly with previous conceptions of Christian and non-Christian thought. Remythologization brings together the sacred and the secular to such a degree that there is no longer any distinction. The dichotomy between sacred and secular, science and theology, does not fit in the model of remythologized African American church theology.

8. White Orthodox Theology and Neo-orthodoxy. One of the most important examples of Christian thinking of Western

---

<sup>17</sup> Bultmann, 20.



Theology is found in the person of Karl Barth. In his rejection of liberalism and his subsequent rediscovery of the ancient church fathers, his writing has proved to be indispensable to white Western theology. Much of white American theology has been shaped by this theologian who wrote extensively until his death in 1968. One of the central themes of his thought (which this writer's remythologization rejects) is that God is wholly other. Barth believed that the first task of theology is to emphasize the infinite distance between God and man. Barth also believed that God is always hidden and unknown and that it is the nature of man to be the slave of sin.<sup>18</sup> Barth further says, "We have found in the Bible a new world, God, God's Sovereignty, God's glory, God's incomprehensible love. ...Not human stand points but the standpoints of God."<sup>19</sup> Barth parted company with the early church reformers in his doctrine of election. Barth developed a doctrine of double predestination that was somewhat different from his former adherence to the Calvin camp.<sup>20</sup>

Richard Popkin, in his article "Hume's Racism," reminds

---

<sup>18</sup> See James C. Livingston, Modern Christian Thought (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 328-29.

<sup>19</sup> Karl Barth, The Word of God and the Word of Man (New York: Harper, 1957), 42-43, 45.

<sup>20</sup> Livingston, 338.

the reader that not only did Hume hold racist views, the famous theologian Kant once wrote, "but in short, this fellow was quite black from head to foot, a clear proof that what he said was stupid."<sup>21</sup>

Another great shaper of white Western thought was John Calvin. Calvin also developed a double doctrine of predisation which emphasized election and secondarily reprobation. However, Calvin was most interested in election. He believed that election represented the sole activity of God in the work of redemption and salvation.<sup>22</sup>

Central to the thought of the great Western Protestant reformer, Martin Luther, was that Christ had suffered the penalty for human sin. He also believed strongly in the doctrine of atonement and the Deity of Christ.<sup>23</sup>

The aforementioned orthodox and neo-orthodox thinking by Luther, Calvin and Barth are sufficient to illustrate some points of departure from white Western theology and this writer's conception of remythologization for African American theology.

---

<sup>21</sup> Richard H. Popkin, "Hume's Racism," Philosophical Forum 9, nos. 2-3 (1974): 218.

<sup>22</sup> See Arthur Cushman McGiffert, Protestant Thought Before Kant (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1951), 85.

<sup>23</sup> See Livingston, 49.

### Hypotheses

This project is based on the following hypotheses.

1. Christianity, as it has been transmitted to African Americans, often serves as a barrier to personal and social liberation. African American church theology needs to be remythologized and to some degree deconstructed.

2. The African American church has lost much of the historical understanding that led to the initiation of many African American church movements.<sup>24</sup> As a result, the African American church community often fails to function as a positive witness in the context of a community in need of liberation and transformation. The African American churches rather remain weak and many times ineffective objects, controlled by the pathological theology of white Christianity; generally unwilling to challenge and question the overarching problems of society, and the role of the church in addressing these problems. The church, as a result, functions primarily for the purposes of daily survival rather than for the constant betterment of human conditions.

3. African Americans have often fallen prey to what may be characterized as contemporary Christian fundamentalist thought. Such thought seems to be dominated by a dualistic;

---

<sup>24</sup> See Gayraud S. Wilmore Black Religion and Black Radicalism, 2nd ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1986).

otherworldly spirituality that champions a literalistic interpretation of the Bible as the only true and reliable method of evaluating and understanding the human condition. This type of interpretation is detrimental to Blacks since it seems to lead to what may be perceived as apathy and inaction.

4. There is a general stagnation among African American Christians. If the largest and previously most effective institution for reform within the African American community displays little concern for correcting the ills that afflict Black Americans, then possibly, other theological avenues need to be examined.

#### Work Previously Done in The Field

Many African American authors, in expressing their several concerns for the mission and theological position of the African American church, consider not only Christianity, but also other religious, political, and theological persuasions that will have a direct effect on the development of this project. The homocentric understanding of the majority of African American theologians is that oppression is central to the understanding of African American theology. James Cone, in his book, A Black Theology of Liberation, says: "There can be no Black theology which does not take seriously the Black experience--a life of humiliation and suffering. This must be the point of departure of all God

talk which seeks to be black-talk."<sup>25</sup>

According to Cone, the Black experience must be the starting point of theology for Black people. However, for Cone, this Black experience is not merely the cultural history of Black people. "The Bible requires that scripture be a source of Black theology. For it was scripture that enabled slaves to affirm a view of God that differed radically from that of the Slave masters."<sup>26</sup> Oppression, in Cone's view, is connected to the understanding of God's call to the oppressed to liberation. Cone believes there is nothing in scripture that is consistent with the oppression of a particular group of people. It is in the study of the Black experience as well as scripture that the biblical revelation of God's solidarity with the poor and oppressed is revealed.

Josiah Young also agrees on the prospect of oppression being the starting point in the understanding of Black American theology. In fact, Young believes that there is a relationship between Black American and African theologies since both emerged in the late sixties, and both affirmed Blacks rejection of white supremacist rule, thereby setting

---

<sup>25</sup> Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, 54.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 76.

the context for both theologies.<sup>27</sup> According to Young, black theology is sharply political, condemning institutions and attitudes that exacerbate black suffering.<sup>28</sup>

Joseph R. Washington gives an interesting account of Blacks, who in their search for religious relevance, sought to define their existence in terms of the contemporary holiness movement. "A minority of blacks went the route of holiness and formed permanent black sects seeking perfection without concern for social reform."<sup>29</sup> Washington also points out that, "Those who went this way, and do today, did so because they received fragments of white religion during their spiritual hunger and alienation."<sup>30</sup> In support of his argument, Washington further states:

The holiness movement brought poor whites and poor Blacks together in interracial fellowships. Emotional spasms, treeing the devil, jerks, trances, prophecies, speaking in tongues, and all undisciplined religious expressions which are considered the Black man's special province, these extravagances were first taught by whites and only later by Blacks.<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> Josiah U. Young, Black and African Theologies (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1986), 1.

<sup>28</sup> Josiah Young, 2.

<sup>29</sup> Joseph R. Washington, Black Religion (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 134.

<sup>30</sup> Washington, 125.

<sup>31</sup> Washington, 114.

The holiness movement was tailor made to address the desperate situation of African Americans. There is nothing you can do for yourself morally, spiritually, or socially. God alone can do it. The African American holiness sects were therefore a direct result of the white religious movement. The permanent black sects, according to some thinkers, are the result of the lower class whites, who reacted against conventional cultural religion.

In the words of Gayraud Wilmore Jr., "The problem of the white-styled black churches today is how to recover their own self-respect by demythologizing the white cultural bag through which the faith has been transmitted to them."<sup>32</sup>

Wilmore argues that the viability of the whole Christian church is at stake. Unless new relationships between African American and white churchpeople can be developed, the church may cease to have any meaningful contact with Black people at all. The question for Wilmore is not one of integration. The question is whether or not this church can any longer encompass the masses of non-white persons, who make up the majority of the peoples on the earth.<sup>33</sup> Wilmore points to the fact that the African American churches that split off from

---

<sup>32</sup> Gayraud Wilmore, Jr., "The Case for a New Black Church Style," Church in Metropolis, Fall 1968; reprinted in Lincoln, The Black Experience in Religion, 34.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 35-36.

the Methodist and Baptist denominations borrowed heavily from white church tradition. Those African Americans who remained a part of mainline white churches were forced into second-class citizenship. Those Black churches, in abandoning much of their Black culture in favor of white church traditions, became a sort of poor facsimile of the real thing. Wilmore characterizes them as a "second-class culture for second-class Christians."<sup>34</sup>

William Jones, in his article, "Theodicy and Methodology in Black Theology: A Critique of Washington, Cone and Cleage," emphasizes that the starting point of Black theology must be Black liberation. Jones issues a call for Black theologians to reappraise the traditional concepts of the church. According to Jones, it is not acceptable for the African American theologian to blindly accept the tenets of traditional Christianity. When one considers the inordinate amount of suffering in the African American community, even the very idea of the universal love of God must be called into question. According to Jones, the point of departure for all Black theology must be the question: "Is God a white racist?"<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>35</sup> William Jones, "Theodicy and Methodology in Black Theology: A Critique of Washington, Cone, and Cleage," Harvard Theological Review 64 (1971): 541-57.



### Scope and Limitations

This project is intended to examine Christianity in the United States and its effect on personal and social liberation and transformation of the African American community. Since this study is subject to the usual limitations, no attempt will be made to speak for the entire African American community. However, the thinking of several African American's throughout the country will be employed. The results of this study will however have implications that extend beyond this researchers academic area. This study cannot propose to speak for the theological formation of each African American.

Christianity, as it is practiced in the African American community, may serve as a barrier to the process of personal and social liberation of an oppressed people. When the increased levels of poverty, violence, educational castration, and apparent apathy are considered in relationship to the theological response of the African American church, the church seems to be relatively unresponsive. It may be that the African American church often considers many workable responses to the problems of contemporary society outside of the realm of Christian activity. This study intends to examine the thought and practice of African American Christians, in order to determine whether the pressing problems of African Americans

can be met within the framework of contemporary Christianity.

#### Procedure for Integration

This study has been accomplished by employing the following methods:

1. Library research. Particular theological, sociological, and historical positions of recognized scholars were examined in order to establish and describe the body of thought, attitudes and actions within the African American community, and their respective relationships to the contemporary problems of the African American church. An attempt has been made to identify correlations between the theological positions of the Black church, with the economics, educational levels, and methods of addressing those situations.

2. Empirical Observation. It is the intention of this researcher to live, study, and work in the community targeted by this project as a participant observer in the similar manner that was employed by Martin Luther King Jr., in his study of the Chicago ghetto which resulted in his book, Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community? King was able to observe, first hand, the effects of church and society on ghetto residents in general, and his own family life in specific. This researcher does not consider it possible to stand apart from this considered situation and capture the tenor of the community to be examined. For this reason the

writer lived in the African American, urban community of Redlands, California during the writing of this project. The writer further became a licensed Baptist minister, and worked at the largest Black Baptist church in Redlands. To gain more information the writer became ordained in The Church of God in Christ, and served as assistant to the Bishop, and pastor of an urban African American church in San Bernardino, California.

## CHAPTER 2

### African Influences on African American Christianity

There are now many volumes written by African American authors that explain the historical link between the African and the African American religious experience. However, it is still profitable to argue the presence of traditional African beliefs in African American religious practice and belief, since the African response to white society was a pathenogenic accommodation to a racist society. Although the focus of this project is upon the more contemporary phenomenon of remythologizing the Christian religious experience as a possible source of liberation and transformation of the African American community, mention must be made of the connection between African American and African theologies in order to understand the historical development of this debate.

Since the beginning of Christianity in the African American community, the religion of the slave masters has been considered by many African Americans as a reasonable vehicle for accomplishing the liberation of an oppressed African American population. It has been generally supposed by Blacks that within the realm of Christianity, there lay the means of interpreting the method and language of an oppressed peoples

struggle for corporate and personal liberation.<sup>1</sup> Little consideration has been given to the fact that Africans had an equally cogent and logical religion before they left their homeland. In fact, it was the purpose of whites to destroy the native religions and myths within the African culture in order to make the African more suitable for the task of slavery. It was within the context of African mythology and religion that the slaves gave meaning and shape to their world. The manner in which the African explained the purpose of nature, God, and humanity through these two modes of cultural transmission was integral not only to their existence in Africa, but also to their forced existence in America.<sup>2</sup> For this reason, the captured African was obliged to retain as much of the native religion as humanly possible.

The religious focus of African Americans has been almost exclusively on the interpretation of the Christianity transmitted to them by the American majority population. However, closer examination reveals that African American Christianity has many aspects that may be considered as

---

<sup>1</sup> Charles H. Long, "Assessment in New Departures for a Study of Black Religion in the United States of America," Assessment and New Departures for a Study of Black Religion in the United States of America, ed. Gayraud S. Wilmore (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989), 34-35.

<sup>2</sup> Gwinyai H. Muzorewa, The Origins and Development of African Theology (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1985), 10-11.

carryovers of African religion. Contained within these Africanisms were the seeds of liberation which now confound the majority of the American population.

The African Connection with

Slave Religion

For the African, religion is a very human affair. Religion is not a phenomenon that takes place at some undetermined point in the sky. Religion is something that happens in the ordinary course of human existence. There is as a result, less of a separation between secular and sacred, since God is able to enter into human affairs at any level of imagination. The religion of the African is a religion of celebration. The spirit of God is a living spirit to be celebrated in the song and dance and language of every day life. In the rituals, religious beliefs are brought to life. "Dancing, drumming, and singing play a constant and integral part in the worship of God and the ancestors."<sup>3</sup> The various attributes of God are personified and personalized through the songs and dances which further bring the spiritual into direct relationship with the human actors. These aspects of slave religion were easy for outsiders to misinterpret. Wilmore states,

---

<sup>3</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, Slave Religion (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 15.

The brooding melancholy of the Negro spirituals has led some to believe that the religion of the slave was one of unreveiled gloom and grief--a religion of lost souls flailing hopelessly against darkness.<sup>4</sup>

White American missionaries among the slaves, held a curious suspicion that the exuberant religious expression of the slave was little different than the drunken celebrations of a Saturday night. The African aspect of celebration was difficult for those other than the Africans to understand. According to African religious thought, the entrance of divinity into the human sphere of activity was an event to be celebrated.

The grim determination and punctiliousness with which many Protestants went about the business of saving the souls of the heathen was foreign to the basic sensibilities of the African and Afro-American.<sup>5</sup>

The African aspect of celebration served as a powerful source of vitalization in the newly formed slave community. Although scholars may never agree on multitudinous religious forms brought from Africa to the slave quarters, the celebration of life and its interaction with the divine within the community of faith is realistic. It is remarkable not only to examine the manner of exuberance but also the

---

<sup>4</sup> Wilmore, Black Religion and Black Radicalism, 12.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 12.

communal rudiments of African celebration. The celebration of the divine activity was a corporate endeavor. The notion of an extravagantly personal God was decidedly uncharacteristic. The togetherness of the African American slave community bound them collectively so that they could endure immoderate oppression as well as form mass opposition to the American societal norms that purported them inferior and worthy of enslavement.

The interaction of Christianity, traditional religion and oppression produced interesting results in the slave community. Wilmore relates, "Members of the same church were sometimes sacrally bound not to reveal each other's sins."<sup>6</sup> While this may well have been an outgrowth of oppression and Christianity, it also may have reasonably occurred as a product of traditional religion. Since the majority of slaves cannot be identified as professing Christians during the first century of slavery, it may be suspected that their sense of community may have derived from another source. The only remembered sense of historical community for them to draw upon was their traditional African culture. For the African, the community was bound together by African tradition and the oppression of slavery, which was in direct relationship to their culture and color. Despite the message

---

<sup>6</sup> Wilmore, Black Religion and Black Radicalism, 9.



of Christianity, these four determining factors of the African American mentality would never be changed. It was most probably the mind set that the African brought to the situation of slavery and Christianity that caused them to create, within those oppressive circumstances, the tools of survival. The very ability to celebrate in the midst of pain and suffering was a remarkable achievement. Rather than blindly assume that Christianity provided the framework, it is beneficial to also consider that the slaves brought to their situation the ability and the necessity to resignify the purposes of the only meeting times sanctioned by their masters. Those gatherings were infused with the language and forms for survival carried over from their native African cultures. The experience of African culture in African American religion was one aspect of this new Christianity that was not strictly a reactive response to white oppression.

#### The Early Slave Church

The early meetings of the African American church had little of the character of their Calvinistic counterpart. The early African American church according to DuBois, "was not at first by any means a Christian Church, but a mere adaptation of those heathen rites which we roughly designate

by the term Obe Worship, or Voodooism."<sup>7</sup> This is testimony not only to the fact of Africans being at least reluctant to adopt the Christian faith wholeheartedly; but that they also brought with them a measure of their traditional African religious practice. It is false to believe that Africans readily assimilated American Protestantism without marked resistance. Missionaries labored among the slave populations for decades with almost no significant results. One particular Methodist missionary worked among the slaves for one year and was able to add only one African American to his conversion tally.<sup>8</sup> Other missionaries, in their labors among the slaves were able to convert less than one percent of the slave population in more than twenty years. White missionaries were in great despair over their inability to penetrate the barrier of traditional African religion. There seemed to the missionary to be little difference between the religion of the slaves and what the missionary believed to be the practiced animism of Africa.<sup>9</sup>

The sense of community and covenant sustained the Black

---

<sup>7</sup> W. E. B. DuBois, The Negro Church (Atlanta: Atlanta University Press, 1903), 5.

<sup>8</sup> See Wade Crawford Barclay, Early American Methodism, 1769-1844, vol. 1 (New York: Board of Missions and Church Extension, Methodist Church, 1950).

<sup>9</sup> August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, From Plantation to Ghetto (New York: Hill and Wang, 1970), 3.

slave in their existence of peril and misfortune. Of course, religion was also a portentous aspect of their existence. However, as their religion stood alone it was meaningless. Their language as it stood alone was normless. The African American mindset was a product of not only previous societal norms; it was an interaction of African culture and white American oppression. The two opposing forces interacted, with the result of producing a distinctly African American culture which endures in various forms to this day, and remains as an oddity in the eyes of mainstream America.

The acts of celebration as practiced by African Americans in the church community of the twentieth century are directly related to the acts of celebration of their African predecessors. Albert Raboteau uses several illustrations and sources to illustrate the reaction of whites to the celebrations and exuberances of the slave. Rabateau points out that, Reverend John Sharpe complained in 1712 that even Christianized slaves in the city of New York were still practicing what he believed to be heathenish rites at grave sites.<sup>10</sup> "He was particularly disturbed that Sundays and holidays are days of idleness...in which the slaves assemble together in alarming crowds for the purposes of dancing,

---

<sup>10</sup> Raboteau, 66.

feasting and merriment."<sup>11</sup> Rabateau states that,

Later Methodist, Presbyterian, and Baptist revivalists condemned these secular forms of amusement and taught the slaves that conversion required their abandonment. While evangelical missionaries prohibited dancing as sinful, they afforded the slaves a morally sanctioned context for a sacralized type of dancing in the emotionally charged setting of the revival.<sup>12</sup>

Conversion to Christianity did not lessen the slaves desire for exuberant celebration. The dancing and singing of the slaves in church seemed little different from the work songs of the slaves in the field. Despite the efforts of Christian workers to silence the various forms of slave religious celebration, the slaves irreversibly influenced their teachers. Just as the slave sang tune after tune while clapping and singing at evening religious meetings, whites that watched them started to exhibit the same behavior. Such behavior caused no little amount of condemnation of Black and white alike by those whites who disdained the religion of the slave.

Rabateau offers several accounts of the slave religious experience. Authentic testimony from plantation owners of their slave's religious zeal invokes in the mind of the

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 66.

reader an image of what could be considered a traditional religious scene among Africans.

The religious dance most frequently described was the ring shout of the slaves of the South Sea Islands. The ring shout, musicologists agree, is a particularly strong example of African-influenced dance style in the United States.<sup>13</sup>

Even the A.M.E. Bishop Daniel Payne believed the ring shout and such forms of worship as heathenish, disgusting, and irrational. However, Payne does indicate that without such forms of religious expression, the slaves may have had some trouble with the Christian religion.<sup>14</sup> Dancing and singing were crucial to the conversion and religious expression of the slave. One slavemaster noted that it was the custom of his slaves to,

work themselves to a great pitch of excitement, in which they yell and cry aloud, and finally shriek and leap up, clapping their hands and dancing, as it is done at heathen festivals.<sup>15</sup>

According to Bishop Payne:

What is more deplorable, some of our most popular and powerful preachers labor systematically to perpetuate this fanaticism. Such preachers never rest

---

<sup>13</sup> Raboteau, 68.

<sup>14</sup> Raboteau, 73.

<sup>15</sup> Raboteau, 68.

until they create an excitement that consists in shouting, jumping and dancing.<sup>16</sup>

Much of this type of excitement exists in the African American church of the twentieth century. There is little room for argument against the carryover of the forms or rituals of traditional African religion and plantation slave religion into the African American church of 1991. However, the crucial element of both traditional African and slave plantation religion is the language of liberation that gave the rituals meaning. This language may be too often missing in the contemporary African American church. Slaveowners feared Christianity among the slaves in many instances because there was the possibility that the seeds of rebellion lay in the messages of the bible. History may prove them correct. When a slave affirmed that he or she would rather die than give up his or her religion, he was taking a vital step toward freedom. Raboteau, in his account of a slave response to his master regarding the cessation of religious practice states; "I'll suffer the flesh to be dragged off my bones...for the sake of my blessed redeemer."<sup>17</sup>

Missionaries, by way of the Bible, inadvertently put the slave in touch with another language of the One who was God

---

<sup>16</sup> Raboteau, 69.

<sup>17</sup> Raboteau, 307.

of both Black and white. The slaves professed belief in a God who was capable of changing the circumstances of any individual or group according to nothing more than capricious whim. Within Christianity lay the moral imperative to obey the perceived laws of God rather than white people. As long as the slave was convinced that God was on the side of the master there could be no particular problems. However, once the slave determined that God was concerned about justice for all, a radicalism that sought to overturn the social system was the duty of the oppressed.

The attunement to the supposed spiritual world is another similarity between African and African American religious practice.<sup>18</sup> For the new African American, the universe was a three story proposition. God, the supreme being, usually dwells on high, while lesser spirits dominate the middle and lower strata. It is assumed that God is too great to interact with humans ordinarily, so the spirit world is particularly important in everyday enterprise. Christianity, as taught by the missionaries, was not foreign to African sensibilities because it was generally assumed that God must become man before relating on human terms. The African concept of ancestor worship combined readily with the idea of Jesus as the Son of God. It was necessary for God to

---

<sup>18</sup> Raboteau, 65.

become human in order for God to enter directly into human affairs. This writer believes that this aspect of African American religion, more than any other seemed to pose the greatest threat to slaveowners.

The spiritual aspect of the slave religion differed from the Christianity of the masters not only because of oppression, but also due the direct link between African and African American religious beliefs. Whites considered their own beliefs and practices as religion while conversely purporting the slaves to be magical. The importance of this must not be passed over lightly. This writer believes the slaveowners believed the religion of the slave to be decidedly inferior to its European influenced counterpart. To say that the slaves were more magical and therefore less intellectual in their religious practice was intended as derision. The slave forms of worship were considered not only animistic, but base and primitive responses by people lacking adequate knowledge of the natural order of the universe. Whites thought it therefore sensible to try as much as possible to trample the religious expression of the slaves under foot, or at least suppress it. The distinction between the ritual and language of the African Americans as opposed to whites was an important tool for the drawing of lines between the races. However, the importance of the spiritual in the separation of the races does not end at this



junction.

### Magic, Culture and Radicalism

The Christianity given to the slave was intended to serve as religion. Slavemasters, however, believed that the slaves were turning the religion into magic.<sup>19</sup> Religion assumes the posture of dependence on a higher intelligence for the receiving of blessings or the correction of circumstances through humble petition. Magic assumes that the individual has the capacity to manipulate the environment on his or her own. Magic supposes that an end may be accomplished by performing a series of tasks and rituals. In addition to prayer, the slave was apt to use conjures in combination with petition. This made whites feel that the African believed himself to have God at his disposal.<sup>20</sup> Although little fundamental difference may exist between magic and religion, the difference in attitude toward them separate the two irrevocably. This represents an early example of remythologization of the Christian faith.

The material and the spiritual world were not significantly different to the African.<sup>21</sup> Things that are invisible are just as real as those which are visible.

---

<sup>19</sup> Raboteau, 34.

<sup>20</sup> Edmund Davis Soper, The Religions of Mankind (New York: Abingdon Press, 1921), 70.

<sup>21</sup> Soper, 77.

Therefore, the idea of the Holy Spirit was easily adopted into slave religious practice. If the slaves were to reconcile the message of justice from the Bible, with the action of the holy spirit urging one to take a stand against injustice, then the seeds of rebellion were sown. The message of Christianity as delivered to African Americans by whites was not dangerous in itself. It became dangerous when it was combined with traditional African religion. The community of the oppressed was thus able to mobilize in many instances against the oppressor by using Christianity as a base. Christianity gave the African a vision of a new heaven and a new earth, and their traditional religion hinted to them the means to effectuate it.

The rebellious nature of some of the slaves has been attributed to the message of Christianity. This is likely an incorrect assumption. The masters used the Christian message as a tool of suppression. Little serious attention was given to the ritual and language of the slave in the bush arbor when those slaves expressed themselves in an other than Christian form of expression. Behavior would have been noted, but the language alone would have been more often overlooked as long as it was not particularly derogatory and offensive to whites. Whites, after all, considered the African slave as primitive and stationary; only able to relate to their situation on the most basic of levels. In

fact, many of the Negro spirituals, which were really songs of liberty, were often passed off by whites superficially as musings of an ignorant people.

The religious development of the African American cannot be understood outside of the culture in which it developed. The manner in which the culture develops determines the manner in which religion develops. The culture of the African coalesced with the culture of the American oppressors to produce the unique culture of the African American. As the Black Africans interacted with the institutions of white oppression, they found the need to individualize their God. They, as many others before them, sought to be in relationship with a God who could relate to them on their own human terms. Since the African belief system generally held that before God could interact with humans, God had to first become human, the teachings of the missionaries were therefore not far removed from some of the beliefs of traditional African culture.<sup>22</sup>

There is nothing more distinctly American than the African American. If, according to many African American theologians, the starting point of Black theology is the African American experience of white oppression, then a major proportion of African American civilization has been shaped

---

<sup>22</sup> Raboteau, 8.

by the evil acts of white people. African American theology could not have ripened without the seasoning of evil on the part of the white community of faith. However, the rich heritage among African Americans that Christianity had to interact with should not be forgotten. The starting point for African American theology was not the experience of oppression alone, but the interaction of traditional African culture with a distorted Christianity: all acting to respond to white oppression. To place too little value on the baggage Africans brought with them is a discount to the authentic humanity of the slave. Apart from what many historians and sociologists believe, Black culture did not begin when Blacks landed in America. This distinctly Black culture, more specifically, African American, is a part of a particular and larger Black culture that is in evidence all over the globe. The interaction of Africans with the experience of slavery, the middle passage, Jim Crow, and various forms of white oppression in America, have all served in the creation of the syncretic religious experience that history now terms African American.

#### Radicalism and the Slave Community

An excellent example of the thinking of African Americans during slavery comes from an address by The Reverend Henry Highland Garnet. This address, according to Meier, Rudwick, and Bracey, urging the slaves to revolt

against their masters, explicitly expresses the sense of identity and solidarity with the slaves felt by the free people of color.

Second, it calls for violent overthrow of the Southern economic system, based implicitly upon united and collective action by the slaves themselves.<sup>23</sup>

It is also significant that such an address would come from a free, African American clergyman. His address, delivered before the House of Representatives in 1843, explains that the first dealings that African Americans had with Christian whites was of the most evil of natures. African Americans were destroyed by white oppressors with the approval of the church. Although whites were far from ignorant of the principles of liberty, Christianity and Americanism was used for the ultimate degradation of the African slaves. Therefore, the institution of slavery was to be opposed by slaves with any means at their disposal. This was the Christian obligation of the slave. Slaves could do the work of emancipation better than any other people. They should strike the first blow with the very means that were used to enslave them, and gain the liberty of native born citizens. Garnet suggested that God was indignant over the

---

<sup>23</sup> Henry Highland Garnet, "An Address to the Slaves of the United States of America," Black Nationalism in America, eds. John Bracey, August Meier, and Elliott Rudwick (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970), 67.

institution of slavery. The slave should be prepared to die in order to free themselves from bondage. He reminded the slaves that there would be no redemption without the shedding of blood, and resistance must be the motto of the slave.<sup>24</sup> The white Christian message of Christianity had been remythologized.

The thinking of Garnet is removed from the thinking and practice of the contemporary African American church. Twentieth century African American Christians have come to accept non-violence as the only acceptable Christian response to systemic, institutional racism. Garnet however, advanced the idea that the institution of slavery had laid Christian principles to waste. It was evil according to Garnet, for the slave not to resist with every tool at his command. After recounting the injustices done to Blacks, Garnet concluded that they could suffer no worse fate than their present state. It was better to be dead than a slave. It must be acknowledged that it was probably less difficult for Garnet than the slave to put forth such a premise.

Bishop Henry M. Turner was also an important figure in the development of independent African American theological thought. Turner believed the Africans should demand indemnity from the United States and use the money to return

---

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 76.

to their native Africa. Although most of his following had never seen Africa, and could hardly consider it native, Turner's rhetoric was appealing to a number of African Americans with strong nationalistic tendencies, as well as those with an inward longing for a rearrangement of societal norms. Wilmore, in his book Black Religion and Black Radicalism, states:

It was left to the radical abolitionists and a few Black preachers such as Henry H. Garnet and Henry M. Turner to make the American public aware, before the end of the nineteenth century, that Blacks had never been content in their bonds, and that from the beginning of slavery they had made a persistent effort to free themselves.<sup>25</sup>

Both preachers showed that there were alternate methods to the approach to freedom. Wilmore points out that the popular view is to believe that African Americans did little to secure their freedom rather than purchase it on patently unfair terms, or beg for it.<sup>26</sup> Turner suggested nothing less than territorial separation and emigration to Africa as a means of alleviating the racism that was rampant after reconstruction. Meier, Bracy and Rudwick believe,

During the late 1870's the growing racism that accompanied the close of reconstruction combined with economic depression to produce considerable

---

<sup>25</sup> Wilmore, Black Religion and Black Radicalism, 29.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 29.

interest among working-class Negroes in the possibilities of migrating to a more favorable location. Both the American midwest, especially Kansas, and Africa were regarded as likely places of refuge.... Sentiment for moving to either area, though undoubtedly precipitated by stark economic conditions, involved disillusionment with the South and revealed distinct nationalistic overtones. Later in the century, both the attempt, on the one hand, to create an all-black state in Oklahoma and all Negro towns like Mound Bayou, Mississippi, and the brilliant rhetoric of Bishop Henry M. Turner on the other, were to offer more dramatic evidence of nationalistic feelings. These in turn would be overshadowed in the twentieth century by the Garveyites.<sup>27</sup>

Turner was also one of the early African American theologians to put forth the idea that God is Black. His call for the migration of African Americans to a separate nation and his damning of white society foreshadowed the nationalistic movements of the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>28</sup> The nationalistic thinking of Turner exposes a type of radical thinking among Negroes that was previously thought to be nonexistent in the African American community. The myth of the African American quietly accepting the bonds of slavery and repression is not consistent with the thinking of many of the African American theologians of the day. Turner, along

---

<sup>27</sup> John Bracey, August Meier, and Elliott Rudwick, eds. Black Nationalism in America (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970, 156.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 167.



with many others of his contemporaries, believed that the African American stood no chance of being free. Even though the actual bonds of slavery had been removed, injustice was so ingrained in American society that the only means of freedom lay in expatriation.

Bishop Turner paved the way for other African Americans to formulate radical opinions about the maintenance of the institution of racism in America. This type of thinking did not arise solely from Garvey or Malcom X, but it rather had roots in the thinking of historical figures such as Turner and Garnet who found precedent for their thinking in peoples such as Nat Turner, and Denmark Vessey. Slaves may have been able to draw their precedents from not only the slave experience of oppression, but also the revolts of the middle passage, or the experience of being free in their homeland. It is not impossible to believe that the expressions of nationalistic thought in today's churches have roots in the African experience.

The African American experience of oppression was not of a passive nature in the early stages of the development of African American theology. Although Christianity was to some degree controlled by whites, some African Americans found through remythologization, the means to express themselves authentically as African Americans. This writer suggests that the Nat Turner rebellion, the promulgations of Bishop Turner,

the Garveyites, and followers of Henry Highland Garnet, are evidence of the capability of the African American religious movement to produce national leadership. However, since the death of Martin Luther King Jr., little significant national leadership of African Americans has developed. The character of the slave revolts have been lost in a sea of Black complacency. While this rebellious character continued in the 1970s with national leaders outside of the church, the primary agenda of the African American church has been one of quiet accommodation to the majority culture. African Americans have not recaptured the purpose and momentum of the thinking that led African Americans to believe that African Americans can and must lead African Americans in the struggle for the liberation and transformation of American society. As contemporary African Americans struggle to become full participants in American society, acculturation and accommodation, rather than the radicalism expressed by their enslaved predecessors, seem to have become the norms.

#### Christianity and Rebellion

Christianity remained for centuries as the generally accepted structure for all of the least of God's people. Whenever African slaves, on a corporate level, determined to change the direction of an oppressive society, they most often relied on the Christian religion. However, when African slaves took direct personal action in an effort to

reverse an oppressive system, the action was most often considered outside the realm of Christianity. Various methods of subversion and retaliation by individual African American or small groups of African Americans were in the majority of circumstances, distinctly different from the accepted Christian norms. Acts of violence that often seemed capricious or of a spurious nature were many times cathartic expressions of the need of the oppressed to rearrange the government of things. Too often, Christianity provided no language or method for African American expression outside of the white American biblical yardstick. The African American, who may well have been angry at white society in general found that he or she had assimilated no means of affecting societal reforms. This is significant since the interaction of Christianity, white oppression and traditional African culture was sufficient to spawn several such people as Nat Turner. Since the same situations still exist today in one form or another, it maybe reasonable to expect that more Nat Turners should follow. This writer believes the drive-by shootings of the African American neighborhood may soon occur in white neighborhoods also.

Unfortunately, the larger society made no provision for the helpless African American who struck out at irrepressible odds, other than the determination of that persons behavior as either delinquent or criminal. However, it may properly

be determined, that a society or religion that required one to suffer oppression in silence, century after century, was the greater perpetrator of crime and violence. In fact, the expectation of the Christian religious community, for the slave victim to perpetually turn the other cheek, was unreasonable to the point of criminality. The whole of the American Constitution rests on the belief in the rational ability of an oppressed community to respond to injustice by any necessary means. It is an unfortunate fact that neither the Constitution nor white American Christianity considered the concerns and the legitimate demands of African Americans as warranting sufficient attention to address them either legally or spiritually. It may possibly be ascertained that much of the violence in the contemporary African American community is an outgrowth of the white oppression which began during slavery.

More fortunately however, the slave community was able to capture the idealistic spirit of rebellion that first came to American recognition during the middle passages. Just as many slaves were willing to sacrifice their own lives and the lives of their children by either attacking or abandoning the slaveships; many, without benefit of the Christian religion, viewed slavery as so inherently wrong, that several corporate decisions by slaves resulted in the sacrifice of their lives rather than remain in bondage. Since it is reasonable to

assume that neither the Constitution nor the Christian religion was communicated to the slaves during their passage to America, the slaves spirit of rebellion could have originated from the cultural norms that they retained from their homeland. A brief study of the cultural music of the slaves has given elucidation to one manner in which slave insurrections were spread.<sup>29</sup> But also importantly, the slave songs reveal the necessity and the willingness to defy the overwhelming power structure in order to cast off the bonds of slavery. If this spirit has been lost or abandoned by contemporary African Americans in the United States, it is in sore need of recovery. Nevertheless, it is a spirit that dwelled in the Black psyche long before their contact with Christianity. When Christianity was transmitted to Blacks, the remythologization of its message was a logical course.

#### Chapter Summary

When the slave corporately professed belief in the Christian God, he or she was seemingly pledging allegiance to white-imposed standards of behavior that served to maintain cohesion and also order among the struggling African American. Rather than a rigid profession of faith in the God of white religion, the outward acceptance of the tenets of the white masters' faith was an inward expression of

---

<sup>29</sup> Raboteau, 248.

solidarity among the disinherited. The slave did not totally abandon his traditional religious values in favor of Christianity. They merely adapted the vernacular to their particular needs. Christianity in the African American community became the language of organization and cohesion among a socially disorganized, heterogeneous, poverty stricken people.

Before Christianity, the society of the slaves were prevented from developing an expression of community spirit and the solidarity of a stable community. Also, Christianity among the slaves served to limit the previously diverse precepts of accepted social behavior. This is not to say that the slaves knew nothing of the violence and criminal acts perpetrated against them before they accepted Christianity. Neither were the slaves in need of a moral standard of behavior. However, this writer believes that prior to the acceptance of Christianity in the slave community, there was no form of behavior that was both acceptable to the white community and capable of expressing some of the slaves dissatisfaction with the societal norms of slavery. Christianity served the dual purpose of satisfying some of the slaves needs for expression, a sense of equitable resolution of societal problems, and the masters needs to see his slaves subservient by conversion to Christianity.

The slaves, while outwardly embracing the faith of their

masters, used the Christian construct to in some sense subvert the pathology of white society, while at the same time bolster their own sense of divine justice. The seeming accommodation of the slave's religion was never an actual approbation of the pathological religion of white society. Christianity rather provided a technique of survival for the slave in a populace which offered no other acceptable form of protest against overwhelming obstacles. The religion of the slave took a form of radicalism not formerly demonstrated in the African American community. However, its development was based partially on the pathology of white societal religion.

## CHAPTER 3

Reaction: The Prevailing Posture  
of African American Christianity  
Shaping African American Theology

At the turn of the century, and especially after World War I, there was a large migration of African Americans from Southern rural areas into the urban milieu of the Northern cities. Historians and sociologists agree that this unprecedented mass move of African Americans caused a multiplicity of adjustment enigma for the new residents of the cities.<sup>1</sup> Migrating African Americans had to acquire employment and adjust to radically different subsistence circumstances. African Americans found a new societal pecking order among the new African American residents from the South and the older and more established residents from the North. To further compound the problems of adjustment, the new African American resident found himself in a new and competitive relationship with white people. African Americans migrating to the North found both the white economic and social institutions to be unwilling to accept them as even second class citizens. Some of the darker skinned African Americans or those African Americans who lacked formal

---

<sup>1</sup> Wilmore, Black Religion and Black Radicalism, 143.



education found the doors of many African American institutions to be effectively locked as well. The problem of adjustment of African Americans to the Northern urban environment was a major factor in shifting groups and individual African Americans toward a position of radicalism or accommodation. In fact, the problem of acclimation in the North may have been as significant as the problem of Jim Crow in the South. Both Northern and Southern African Americans were forced to make choices of long standing effect. They could choose insurgence against a white society which could probably defeat even a full scale war against a disorganized people, or they could choose the stance of the accomodationists and try to survive as sojourners in an alien land, who had a new name written in The New Jerusalem. Other than those few African Americans who chose a more nationalists route, these seemed to be the only choices that African American people considered as viable options at the time. Two factors--the problem of adjustment to Northern society, and Jim Crow in the South--were among the most powerful shapers of the direction of African American theological thought and practice according to this writer.

The response of African Americans to the closed doors of society was to solicit the only form of institutional refuge with which they were familiar. That institution was the church. Unfortunately, those African Americans of darker skin

or less education or social skills were often not welcomed in denominations such as the A.M.E. church. Some other African Americans who found themselves in a lower economic and educational strata of African American society became operative in the Baptist church. Gayraud Wilmore points out that "a small minority mainly of lighter color, were joining the black congregations of white denominations."<sup>2</sup> And according to Joseph Washington, those Blacks who were on the very bottom rung of both Black and white society became members of the Black sects and cults. Washington says,

Negroes in cults, the separated brethren, are for the most part on a lower socio-economic rung in the world of the Negro. Indeed, there is some basis for the oft repeated claim that cults were created out of the failure of independents and dependents to keep alive concern for the well-being of all Negroes, regardless of their education and station.<sup>3</sup>

It is significant to note that the majority of the African American people attending church in this epoch are members of the organizations that Washington has identified as sects and cults. Wilmore relates that according to the 1980 census over three million Blacks were members of the Church of God in Christ alone. This is an portentous observation since according to Washington these organizations

---

<sup>2</sup> Wilmore, Black Religion and Black Radicalism, 144.

<sup>3</sup> Washington, 113.

are counter productive to the Black social and religious experience.

The separated brethren in Negro cults do not contribute to the eradication of the underlying problems facing the tide of Negroes surging up from the rural areas of the country....The new serfs do not know what the going values of life are and therefore do not attempt to achieve them.<sup>4</sup>

While this may be a rather harsh statement by Washington, the dynamics of the predicament are in some cases true. The members of the African American sects and cults do often have a rural Southern orientation, and are as a general rule less educated. Although the member of the sect may be on a sincere quest for integration into mainstream society, either cultural or more probably economic, the sect will afford little progress. The sects and cults, as many African American churches of sundry affiliations, are oriented toward an integrationist, survivalist theological response to white oppression. Washington readily demeaned the people that he determined were members of the so-called Black sects and cults since their response to the problems of society differed in character with what Washington considered a decorous response. However, a more considered and objective look at the situation reveals that all of the aforementioned church affiliates probably have more commonalities than

---

<sup>4</sup> Washington, 120.

differences.

One of the most important, although rarely mentioned commonalities, is that the organization and action of the African American church--regardless of denomination--is oriented to react to the conditions of white oppression rather than to proact to the positive aspects of the African American culture. Both the practice of the church as well as the thinking of the prominent African American theologians place their emphasis on reacting to the evils of white society rather than concentrating on the positive mien of the corporate African American society. This reactive posture of the African American church lends the African American church, regardless of denomination to control by white society. Although African Americans within the ranks of the church would hardly accede that they are controlled by whites, it is nonetheless true since the African American religious experience is in many ways governed by its response to, and experience of white oppression.

#### White Oppression and African American Theology

For this reason it is important to understand the legacy of the African American church fathers and heroes alluded to in Chapter 2. While the church has long lost the radicalism and direction of the nineteenth century, one point of contact that could not be discarded was the overpowering influence of white oppression on the development of religious thinking and

institutional development. Turner, Garnet, Richard Allen, and many of the most notable figures in the development of the African American church were acting in response to their perception of the institution of white racism. While the nineteenth century church fathers saw liberation from white racism as a primary function which took place under the guise of propagating the gospel, the more contemporary African American churchpeople's agenda has been survival in a racist and white reined society by using the church as a refuge. There are certainly other elements that are conversely common and alien to both churches of their respective centuries. But a point to be stressed in this project is the common course of reaction that was congealed by both blacks and whites when they engineered the institution of Christianity among the slave populace. There are certainly specific circumstances that do not fit the general rules that span across generations. However, generalizations may be profitable at this point in order to understand the product of such a synthesis. Lawrence Jones, in his article, "The Black Churches: A New Agenda," points out that

religious institutions in black  
communities have not been sufficiently  
cognizant of the radical implications

which the changing political, economic and social realities have for their life.<sup>5</sup>

#### Accommodation and Radicalism

Whether the church has taken a stance of accommodation or radicalism, there has been little effort on the part of African American churchpeople to do other than respond to racism. The almost ubiquitous opinion of the church system enforces the need to work within a larger system of racism. Even some of the most published and vocal of the African American theologians such as Wilmore, Major Jones and James Cone are members of white dominated church institutions. There is overwhelming conviction that the primary agenda of the African American church involves the reaction of the African American to white oppression. If this is true then white racism is surely a powerful and moving force in the African American church. Possibly, the African American church must position other issues at the top of its agenda, since the one that has been in operation for generations has done almost nothing to change the institution of white racism nor the condition of African American people as they stand juxtaposed to the white race in America. Despite all of the reactive efforts of African Americans, they are still declining on the economic and social ladder of white society.

---

<sup>5</sup> Lawrence N. Jones, "The Black Churches: A New Agenda," The Black Experience in Religion, ed. Milton C. Sernett (Durham: Duke University Press, 1985), 489.

The reactive stance of the African American church has left African American society with no bargaining power.

By placing their emphasis on the African American experience of racism, and integration into the institutions of white America, African Americans were assuming that the institution of white racism could be changed if only African Americans could finally be accepted into its ranks. History has indicated however, that the institution of white racism is sufficiently profitable for its perpetrators to defend both individual and institutional racism at all costs.

The greatest deterrent to African American Christianity has come in the form of the realization that no matter how Promethean the efforts, white racism, apart from a few legal gains, has remained in full force in the hearts and minds of the majority of American society. Although Christian action may have in many ways stirred the consciences of white Americans, even to the point of cursory legislative action, racism must be seen as an unchangeable given for the majority of marginalized African Americans. More than twenty years after the death of Martin Luther King Jr., white racism in America (as evidenced by the development of the Klan activities, Neo-Nazis, Skinheads, increased joblessness among educationally qualified African Americans, the ever present nonblack ownership and exploitation of African American urban ghettos, and innumerable statistical sociological facts) is

at an all time high. So in order for Christian African Americans, or any other African Americans, to operate realistically in American society, racism must be accepted as a given. African Americans have for centuries relied on an ethic which insisted that one should love one's enemies and overcome evil with good. However, it may be precisely this same Christian love ethic that has kept African Americans in this country slaves for almost four hundred years. This writer believes it would be helpful for African Americans to recognize the pathology of American society, and then confront that pathology as one would confront any other serious infectious disease. Either separate one's person from the pathological agent, or find an antitoxin, in this case a workable African American theology, capable of fighting the disease. Of course, neither of these things can be done until the pathological agent has been sufficiently isolated and identified.

The Black nationalists, many of whom are not necessarily Christian, offer various ideologies that may be integrated into the African American Christian frame of reference in order to afford more hope and possibility to a people who are effectively defeated in the realm of long-term educational, social, economic and political progress. Unfortunately, any program that does not operate under the guise of Christianity as promulgated by the contemporary social ethicist is usually



rejected regardless of pragmatic value, since a plurality of African Americans would like to conclude that gains are to be wrenched from white society through pleading, marching, and moral appeals to the Christian ethics of white society. Again, the powerless, undereducated, Christian African American has nothing to use as a bargaining tool in a society where the institution of racism has proven so immensely profitable to the majority residents. The idea of forcing integration into the fabric and character of the majority culture without powerful tools of negotiation is less than pure fantasy. Appeals to the Christian love ethic as a means of effecting change by African Americans in a racist society should be a low priority item on the agenda of the African American Christian.

This is not to say that marching and pleading and singing have not produced some favorable gains for African Americans in past generations. However, these were the tools of the civil rights movement. Now, for all practical purposes, the civil rights movement is superfluous. There is nothing more to be gained by adhering strictly to its dogma. As the slave learned to remythologize the purpose of their meeting times and the message of Christianity, so must contemporary African Americans remythologize the message that Christianity currently puts forth to the African American community. African Americans must learn to celebrate more

than the meager gains of the civil rights movement, and find the positive elements worthy of celebration by African Americans who are comfortable with expressing themselves authentically as African Americans first and Christian second.

#### Chapter Summary

The unprecedented migration of African Americans from the rural South to the urban North, also marked a general change of religious attitude. The little amount of proactive theological praxis evidenced during the centuries had changed to an almost exclusive posture of reaction to white oppression.

Rather than organize into cohesive socio-cultural groups in the aggressive pursuit of the betterment of their racial status, the majority of African Americans stood outside of such movements, preferring the survival theology offered by the church. Of course, African Americans can hardly be blamed for such a posture. They represented a mostly powerless, landless, uneducated and socio-politically oppressed people. The need for food, shelter and the other necessities of life which were controlled by white people were powerful shapers of African American human behavior. For this reason, the office of the Black preacher became particularly important to his people. In a conversation with Cornish Rogers, professor of pastoral theology at the School

of Theology at Claremont, Rogers indicated that many times the role of the Black preacher became one of a trickster who was able to secure gains for his people from the white community which fulfilled physical needs that would otherwise go unmet.<sup>6</sup> Surely, before we in this epoch condemn such a stance too quickly, we should first consider the accomodationists alternatives. For centuries in this country, African Americans were being hanged for entertaining less than radical thought. Many African American preachers must have sincerely felt it more teleological to outwardly assent to white imposed conformity than to jeopardize the well-being of their flock. African American preachers, in their official roles, have often been able to effectively denounce radicalism, thus keeping the Christian follower outside of secular, proactive movements.

It may have been in this way that the "By and By" escatological, survivalist theology of the African American church came into prominence. However, as is often the case, what the preacher really believed may have never reached the pews. Before Malcom X, who in many ways set the stage for the ideas of Martin Luther King Jr., very few African American figures dared speak against the corporate evils of American society.

---

<sup>6</sup> Cornish Rogers, telephone interview with author, 21 November 1991.

Nevertheless, even the theology of the great Martin Luther King was to some degree controlled by his reaction to white racism. One cannot say otherwise, since he spent the whole of his preaching years denouncing the immoral acts of individual and institutional racism perpetrated against African Americans. While there were certainly many other items on the King agenda, we cannot deny that racism was paramount.<sup>7</sup> This writer holds this example up as a primary example of reactionist theology in the twentieth century. Please note that reactionist is not being used in a negative sense. Reactionism merely seemed an appropriate response to the conditions of the time. However, if we have gained all of the advances that African Americans can achieve via this posture, then it is high time that we moved on to something new in our theological thinking. This writer believes that such new thinking, if the majority of African American people are to advance, must involve, at least to some degree, the remythologization of God.

---

<sup>7</sup> See C. Eric Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr., rev. ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1984).

## CHAPTER 4

## God Mythology in the African American Church

African American theology, especially as it manifests itself in the genre of liberation, has been at best, sporadically applied in both theological seminaries and churches. The theological tenets promulgated by white Christianity have often proved prohibitive to the authentic expression of the African American experience in religion. There are still some theologians, both African American and white alike, who would argue that there is no uniquely African American Christian theology.

According to James Cone, the creation of African American theology was due in part to the writings of Joseph Washington. Washington contended that since African Americans had been excluded from the mainstream Christianity of the white churches, African American churches were not genuinely Christian. Washington and others like himself believed that African American people should find cultural knowledge of themselves through identification with white American values.<sup>1</sup> In his volume on the subject, Washington advances the idea that the institution of the African American church does not really exist.

---

<sup>1</sup> James H. Cone, For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1984), 8.

It is possible to create as we have done, an American Negro folk religion and racially separate persons and congregations of Christian persons, but it is not possible as we are desirous of doing, to create a Negro Christian faith.<sup>2</sup>

Washington believed that African American religion, with its preoccupation with what was believed to be the ethical demands of the faith, was little more than a non-Christian folk religion. African American religion to Washington had no sense of the historic church. Washington further believed that the African American church had no theology or commitment to an inclusive church. As a result of being systematically excluded from white society, Washington saw the Negro church of pre-1964 as a sub-religion stemming from a deficient black sub-culture.<sup>3</sup>

Scholars agree that much of the contemporary African American theologies resulted from the response to Joseph Washington's writings. After Washington's 1964 publication, African American writers began to express dissenting opinions to Washington's outspoken book. James Cone was the next theologian to publish a major work on Black theology. His book Black Theology and Black Power used the theme of liberation as the central message of the gospel. Cone was able to draw on the thinking of Washington, since Washington

---

<sup>2</sup> Washington, 143.

<sup>3</sup> Washington, vii.

was the first to identify Black theology as a unique religious expression. Malcom X was also a powerful model for Cone, as was Martin Luther King Jr.

Washington and others set out to prove that what African Americans had actually done was to create a unique and separate faith apart from Protestantism and Catholicism. Wilmore, Cone, and others have contributed beyond measure to the theological thinking of Black America. But their thinking has sprung from a healthy reaction to the Washingtons as well as the whites. Black academia in the persons of Cone, Wilmore and others have answered the challenge to react to mainline protestantism, but have conversely failed to develop a theology for African American people completely devoid of control by whites.

The whole of African American theology depends on the support in one way or another, on the good will of whites. Cone, Wilmore and others depend heavily on whites to support their lecture tours, publish their books, provide them teaching positions, and guarantee their salaries. If there are practical aspects of their theology, they may not be known among the pews of many churches. However, there is an authentic African American theology apart from the African American church. Nevertheless, African American theologians must necessarily become dependent on the African American church as the African American church must become dependent

on them. The African American theologian must be able to look to the African American church for moral and financial support of their endeavors or face ultimate control by white institutional racism.

Martin Luther King Jr. was a minor exception to this contemporary African American theological norm. While he significantly advanced African American theological thought, he never sought to become a part of a white denomination. Although King preached integration, there was never on his part any attempt to integrate the church. Even though King looked to whites for support in almost all of his political endeavors, he believed that Black people were best suited to be the leaders of the theological enterprise. Although Cone and others openly state that there may be no place for whites in the civil rights movement, white support is solicited at every turn. While the language has sometimes changed, the method is largely the same. This is a decided turn from the direction of Garnet and Turner. Nationalism in the church has been on the decline since reconstruction. By separating contemporary language and action, the accomodationists stance of the contemporary African American theological movement is readily discernible. Further evidence of this fact is Cone's move from an African American denomination to a white predominated United Methodist denomination. When Cone was not accepted by his own African American people, he ran to



the white church for support. His move from the A.M.E. Church to the U.M.C. is offered as evidence. This is not a note of condemnation against such a great theologian and scholar. He, as his antecedents knew they must survive from day to day. This writer believes that his transfer represents the current trend that African American theology is taking.

According to Peter J. Paris, "The tendency of the black churches has been to employ the thought patterns of the white churches in articulating their theological understandings."<sup>4</sup> This writer has attempted to show that at one time there was a type of radicalism and resistance to white Christianity. Many authors agree, however, that the message of the African American church has become little different from the message of the white church. The early slave church saw the value in differentiating the message of the churches in the bush arbor from the message of the institutionalized white church. Slaves understood that the purpose of the white church was to maintain existing power structures by the moral justification of slavery and constant religious affirmation of the status quo. At some point in history, which this writer believes took shape shortly after World War II, the African American church sought legitimacy in the promulgations of white

---

<sup>4</sup> Peter J. Paris, The Social Teaching of the Black Churches (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 75.

theology. Paris goes on to say,

Moreover, by affirming the basic theology of the white churches, the black churches have failed to see the disservice they rendered themselves, since the thought patterns of white churches were not always commensurate with the activities of the black churches, especially those pertaining to the embodiment of racial justice.<sup>5</sup>

The early slave church believed in a God that was just and loving. This type of God was compatible with the God concept of their traditional religion. However, as African Americans migrated North, and sought integration into white urban society, the message of the African American church changed. According to J. Deotis Roberts,

We now understand, through our conversation with Africans, why black slaves never accepted the version of the Bible that white slavery preachers and theologians gave them. By instinct they knew that the God of the Bible hated slavery. ....Therefore, without theological education, indeed without exposure to education at all, black slaves understood God to be just and loving.<sup>6</sup>

According to Gayraud S. Wilmore, sighting a study by Hollenweger, Black membership in 31 Pentecostal churches numbered 4,411,000. The study further revealed three million members of the House of Prayer for All People, and more than

---

<sup>5</sup> Paris, 75.

<sup>6</sup> J. Deotis Roberts, Black Theology in Dialogue (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987), 37.

three million members in the Church of God in Christ by the year 1983. Wilmore points that these churches, mostly splits from mainline denominations, are out stripping the historic Black denominations in both membership and influence.<sup>7</sup> This means that in order to talk about the majority opinion of African Americans relative to the nature and character of God, one must include the aforementioned; as well as the conservative Baptist groups, other fundamentalist sects, storefront churches and Jehovah's Witnesses. United Methodist, United Church of Christ, and other denominations considered mainline, do not represent the numerical majority opinion of practicing African American Christians. Considering Wilmore's research, defining contemporary Black church God-talk becomes a more manageable task. Wilmore says,

By the end of the First World War the independent black churches were becoming respectable institutions. Having rejected the nationalism of Turner, they moved more and more toward what was presented by the white churches as the model of authentic Christian faith and life.<sup>8</sup>

William Jones presented a paper at the School of Theology at Claremont called, "Process Theology: Guardian of the Oppressor or Goad to the Oppressed? Insights from

---

<sup>7</sup> Wilmore, Black Religion and Black Radicalism, 154.

<sup>8</sup> Wilmore, Black Religion and Black Radicalism, 142.

Liberation Theology."<sup>9</sup> This writer believes Jones did a good characterization of the contemporary nature of God as God is perceived by the majority of African American Christians. According to Jones,

There is only one almighty being whom we call God. He is eternal, infinite, invisible, perfectly wise and just. He created all things ...Everything was made in accordance with His plan and is dictated by His will. Everything has a cause and a purpose, and nothing happens by chance or by luck. Man exists for God and not God for man, but men should pray to God who will consider their prayers in the enactment of His will.<sup>10</sup>

God is the playwright, producer, star, agent, and critic.<sup>11</sup>

In the opinion of Nathan Wright, Jr.,

In religious terms, a God of power, of majesty and of might who has made man to be in His own image and likeness, must will that His creation reflect in the immediacies of life His power.<sup>12</sup>

Major Jones believes any meaningful concept of religion must deal with the ultimacy of God. He believes that the

---

<sup>9</sup> William Jones, "Process Theology: Guardian of the Oppressor or Goad to the Oppressed? Insights from Liberation Theology," Manuscript, November 1985, School of Theology at Claremont, Calif., 12.

<sup>10</sup> William Jones, 12.

<sup>11</sup> William Jones, 12.

<sup>12</sup> Nathan Wright, Jr., Black Power and Urban Unrest (New York: Hawthorne Books, 1967), 136.

African American religious quest is authentic only if it conceives itself under God who discloses Himself as a personal Being. Major Jones says that ultimate liberation for Black people can be derived from God alone.<sup>13</sup>

This writer believes, as a result of interviews, personal experience and library research, that the majority of practicing African American Christians believe that God is all powerful. They further believe that God is male, omnipresent, omniscient, omnibenevolent, and the ultimate controller of the destiny of all people. This seems to be consistent with most scholarly research on the subject. This is important because if Major Jones is correct, what one believes about God, controls what one believes about everything else.<sup>14</sup>

The African American Christian's beliefs about God control his or her beliefs about themselves. African Americans' concept of God governs whether they see themselves as full participants in society, or whether they consider themselves as marginal and powerless spectators. The powerless community of faith sees no hope for liberation and transformation of societal or individual ills. While this writer does not believe that one must believe, as James Cone

---

<sup>13</sup> Major Jones, The Color of God (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1987), 22-23.

<sup>14</sup> Major Jones, 20.

believes, that God is Black, this writer does believe that the Christian should be able to identify with God. God does not have to be any particular color, sex or nationality for the believer to look to God and say, "There is something about God that is like me."

## CHAPTER 5

Conclusions and Implications  
for Further Study

Pluralism and African American Theology

This writer believes that if God is to be useful to African American church theology, God must be remythologized. This does not imply that the African American, like other cultural and racial groups, is to mold God in it's own image. African Americans must particularize their thinking about God and their relationship to God, while remaining open to the theologies of other cultures. The contemporary African American church need not accept any cultural foundations about God. However, the African American church should be conscious and in dialogue with the diverse theologies that are representative of other colors and cultures. Alfred North Whitehead, in his volume Process and Reality, points out a danger that African American theology should take seriously. Whitehead says,

The chief danger to philosophy is narrowness of evidence. This narrowness arises from the idiosyncrasies and timidities of particular authors, of particular social groups, of particular schools of thought, of particular epochs in the history of civilization.

The evidence relied upon is arbitrarily based by the temperaments of individuals, by provincialities of groups and by limitations of schemes of thought.<sup>1</sup>

Although African American philosophy and theology is perspectival and particular to one color and cultural group; African American theology, in it's process of remythologization, must open it's vision to all people and ideas in order to develop a unity in thinking that grows from the plural elements of society. Neither separation nor integration are acceptable models. The integration that African Americans have so often sought has usually meant African Americans are incorporated into a majority system that predefines what they should be. Integration means that the African American elements of culture get filtered out.

We need to move toward a wider vision of God than the Black God of James Cone or the white God of Western orthodoxy. The unity that African American theology must seek would allow diverse groups to remain diverse while maintaining the interests of the total world community. According to Cornish Rogers, we must be sensitive to all types of ideas and analysis, whether culture, class or color without giving up the convictions of Black theology.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, Process and Reality, 337.

<sup>2</sup> Cornish Rogers, personal interview with author, 15 November 1989.



According to Cornish Rogers, the narrow vision of Black theology was probably a part of the initial explosion. However, we must open our vision to all of the aspects of the worlds problems. No theology that considers itself global in nature can ever say that it has arrived at the truth. Black theology can only say that it is getting closer. "Remember," says Rogers, "there was no golden age in the past, and there is no way back."<sup>3</sup> African American theology should recognize all of its roots and transitional phases while at the same time avoiding the type of foundationalism that so often grounds African Americans in the reflective fear of past events of oppression. Possibly, African American theology would be wise to pattern at least some of its sensibilities after such antifoundationalists as Cornel West or Alfred North Whitehead.

The dominant white American culture concentrates on the diverse parts of culture rather than pluralistic wholeness. This represents a threat to American society. If African Americans develop a holistic cultural style of doing theology, there is the chance that African American culture may become dominant. African Americans seem to have adapted to various parts of many cultures, while still remaining as those on the underside of life, who try to incorporate and

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

assemble diverse cultural patterns.

African American Theology, Science  
and a God of Power

Before African Americans can begin a profitable remythologization of God, African Americans must realize that there is no separation between theology and science. These boundaries are false.

In so far as any religion has any contact with physical facts, it is to be expected that the point of view of those facts must be continually modified as scientific knowledge advances.<sup>4</sup>

Whitehead believed that the continuing advancement of science should be in conjunction with the unceasing codification of religious thought. In this way, the relevance of scientific thought and its relationship to religion would grow more and more clear.<sup>5</sup>

Whitehead's depiction of the religious climate of the seventeenth century is in many ways characteristic of today's theological condition whether African American or white.

They pictured themselves as the garrison of a fort surrounded by hostile forces. All such pictures express half truths. That is why they are so popular. But they are dangerous. This particular picture fostered a pugnacious party spirit which really expresses an ultimate

---

<sup>4</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, Science and the Modern World (New York: Free Press, 1925), 189.

<sup>5</sup> Whitehead, Science and the Modern World, 189.

lack of faith. They dared not modify, because they shirked the task of disengaging their spiritual message from the associations of a particular imagery.<sup>6</sup>

Whitehead believed that modern science and conditions of life taught humans to meet conditions of apprehension with critical analysis of the apprehension's causes and conditions.<sup>7</sup> When religious appeal is directed in such a manner as to excite the instinctive and primitive fear of the wrath of a tyrant, which was inbred in the empires of the ancient world, religion in the face of scientific discovery loses its force.<sup>8</sup> According to Whitehead,

Religion is the reaction of human nature to its search for God. The presentation of God under the aspect of power awakens every modern instinct of critical reaction.<sup>9</sup>

If Blacks are to include their interaction with the models presented to them by science, they must become suspect of a God of power who is the moving and arbitrary force behind human nature and the workings of the world. An African American theology informed by science rules out the idea of a three story universe with God above, Hell below,

---

<sup>6</sup> Whitehead, Science and the Modern World, 189.

<sup>7</sup> Whitehead, Science and the Modern World, 191.

<sup>8</sup> Whitehead, Science and the Modern World, 191.

<sup>9</sup> Whitehead, Science and the Modern World, 191.

and humans functioning as poor players on the world stage, which lies in the middle stratum of the cosmology.

Henry Young, in considering the Newtonian paradigm's perception of God, perceived great dangers in accepting seventeenth century explanations about the role of God and God's relationship to humans in an oppressive society. Young says,

Traditional theism in the modern period dredged a deep gulf between God and the world. Modern theists, including Newton, believed that God--from a transcendent abode--created the world as a great machine, set it going, and occasionally corrected it when it malfunctioned. One of God's important tasks was to maintain with accuracy the mathematical regularity of the world. Things in the world were thought to function deterministically, based on God's prescribed design. Motion, change, and all activity were believed to follow certain laws of nature. Inherent in this theism is a dualism that presupposes the existence of a supernaturalistic structure that has a restricted and highly categorized relation with the natural order.

We have inherited this dualism and perpetuate its divisiveness when we speak of, for example, sacred-secular, spirit-matter, soul-body, interiority-exteriority, infinity-finite, being-becoming, eternal-temporal, one-many, good-bad, light-dark. Because traditional theists tended to compartmentalize God's relation to the world, they perceived God's intervention in the world much too narrowly.

This narrow perception inevitably  
fostered provincialism and  
ethnocentrism.<sup>10</sup>

Traditional African American theology has relied heavily on the ability of God to supernaturally intervene into the affairs of humans. The traditional beliefs of African Americans have also believed in the ability of God to "work things together for good" in some type of future escatological event. Suffering on earth is often considered redemptive in the African American community, since a God of power is able to consider the sufferings of His children and correct injustice either in this life or more possibly, the next. Many African Americans still hold the traditional belief that says, "The harder the cross, the brighter the crown."

An African American theology that takes science into consideration must to some degree utilize the advances of scientific research models and methods in the development of its thought. Although this writer believes there is more going on in the world than mere consciousness or perception can apprehend, African Americans must nevertheless conclude there is at least no empirical evidence to support a God of power who will supernaturally correct oppression and injustice in this life or the next. With the exception of

---

<sup>10</sup> Henry James Young, Hope in Process (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 26.

theological tradition, there is no evidence to support the dualistic soul-body dichotomy. There is no scientific evidence to support the belief in a heaven, as the abode of the soul, where injustice will no longer reign. The mere thought of a God of power who knows the sufferings of Blacks and conversely does nothing to correct that suffering should awaken every logical suspicion of the African American theologian. There is no empirical justification for a God of power, in the way of James Cone, who has a solidarity with the poor and oppressed. As painful as it may be, rational thought cannot seriously consider faith as the ultimate justification for belief in the antithesis of the patent facts of an orderly cosmology. Re-mythologizing God for African American theology must take these antifoundational tenets into consideration.

Whitehead, in his volume Process and Reality, reminds the reader of the negative influence of ancient Western thought on contemporary theology. "When the Western world accepted Christianity, Caesar conquered; and the received text of Western theology was edited by his lawyers."<sup>11</sup> According to Whitehead, it was in this way that God was perceived as having the same attributes as the divine Caesars. The fashioning of God in the image of Roman,

---

<sup>11</sup> Whitehead, Process and Reality, 342.

Egyptian or Persian imperial rulers, according to Whitehead, is undoubtably wrong. This image given to God by the early church is an idolatrous misconception.<sup>12</sup>

William Jones is to some degree in support of Whitehead regarding the discarding of the idea of a God of power. Jones says,

This controlling feature of oppression brings us to the heart of our discussion. The hierarchical division, with the accompanying inequalities of power and resources institutionally installed--all of this is alleged to be grounded in ultimate reality, God or nature.<sup>13</sup>

If African American theology intends to transform an unjust society, God as the ontological absolute and the legitimating foundation of oppression must be remythologized. African American theology can ill afford to hold on to a God who by caprice distributes power for the purpose of oppression of the powerless. Empirical evidence seems to indicate that the God of power, in the distribution of power to those who use power for the purposes of dehumanizing much of the human race, remains silent and indifferent in the face of inordinate suffering. This writer believes that a good God of power would wield that power to liberate the oppressed. Since no such evidence can be substantiated, it

---

<sup>12</sup> Whitehead, Process and Reality, 342.

<sup>13</sup> William Jones, 8.

must be determined according to simple logic, either God does not have such power, or as William Jones suggests, "Is God a White Racist?" This writer does not believe that God is a white racist. This writer does believe that God does not have the absolute power to unilaterally change the human condition. This apparent lack of power makes one of the strongest cases for the need of remythologization.

Benjamin Mays says,

The Negro's social philosophy and his idea of God go hand in hand. ...Certain theological ideas enable Negroes to endure hardship, suffer pain and withstand maladjustment, but...do not necessarily motivate them to strive to eliminate the source of the ills they suffer.

...the Negro...has stood back and suffered much without bitterness, without striking back, and without trying aggressively to realize to the full his needs in the world.<sup>14</sup>

The remythologization of God should involve the deconstruction of each of the three prevailing concepts of God. God, the ruthless tyrant, at whose word the world came into being, must be discarded. God, the unmoved mover as characterized by Aristotle, must be discarded. Finally, God as presented by the Hebrew prophets must be discarded by African American theology. These ideas, representing the three major concepts of God, do not serve contemporary

---

<sup>14</sup> Benjamin Mays, The Negro's God (New York: Atheneum, 1968), 155.



African American society in seeking to transform an oppressive society. A new concept of God must be developed that is an exclusive product of the African American church theology. For centuries African Americans have waited, hoped and prayed for God to effect positive change in their communities. Needless to say, little change has come about. Of even greater detriment, African Americans reliance on the power of God to bring about change has done little to compel Blacks to effect change on their own. Any tactics that fall outside the norms of white Christianity are often seen as unacceptable alternatives to African American church theology.

As a result, African Americans are on a continual slide down the socio-political, economic and church growth continuum. This writer believes that this general decline is controlled mostly by the African American concept of God. In order to reverse the trend, African Americans need to remythologize the pathological versions of white American Christianity, and resultantly construct a more rational theology that realizes that God is a neutral God, with no preference toward poor and oppressed, rich and privileged.

#### A Remythologized Vision of God

Western theology has often put forth the idea that God is totally other and apart from the world. According to Rem Edwards,

We must forsake the theistic and supernaturalistic notions about God's detachment from the changing circumstances of finite existence. We must eradicate the bias that says there is something intrinsically inferior about the dynamic and pluralistic.<sup>15</sup>

God must be seen as an integral part of every event that takes place in the world. God is a part of the great Christian institutions of past epochs, while God is also a part of the revolutionary forces that tear those institutions down. As African Americans take part in the preservation, destruction and remythologization of Western concepts about God, they must realize that this is a part of the action of God in the world. God is in a constant state of becoming, and the iconoclastic destruction of the old idolatry is a valuable part of the existence of God. God is changing along with the actions of society. According to Whitehead,

The vicious separation of the flux from the permanence leads to the concept of a entirely static God, with eminent reality, in relation to an entirely fluent world, with deficient reality.<sup>16</sup>

God participates in every event in history. Belief in an all powerful God at whose fiat the world came into being has serious consequences. If God created everything, God must have created evil. If God in some way participates in

---

<sup>15</sup> Rem B. Edwards, Reason and Religion (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), 190.

<sup>16</sup> Whitehead, Process and Reality, 346.

every event in human events, God participates in the inordinate suffering of African Americans. While this writer will not accept the traditional theistic notion of God's creation, God's participation is accepted. The question is, "How does God participate?"

It has been noted that African Americans have endured centuries of hardship and still managed to remain intact as a people. Surely God participated in their preservation. The suffering of African Americans is a part of the suffering of God. However, God does not have the power to alleviate that suffering. God has also participated in the various attempts to tear down systems of oppression, but God alone is powerless to change the human circumstance on God's own. Belief in a God who is with all creation rather than apart from all creation is an important step in forming a workable and rational African American theology.

Alfred North Whitehead, in rejecting the traditional theistic philosophy of Western Christianity says,

yet another suggestion which does not fit well with any of the three main strands of thought. It does not emphasize the ruling Caesar, or the ruthless moralist, or the unmoved mover. It dwells upon the tender elements of the world, which slowly and in quietness operate by love; and it finds purpose in the present immediacy of a kingdom not of this world. Love neither rules, nor is it unmoved; also it is a little oblivious as to

morals. It does not look to the future;  
for it finds its own reward in the  
immediate present.<sup>17</sup>

This writer has emphasized the need for the new African American theology to draw its thinking from the plural elements of society, rather than pattern its thinking after a white theology which concentrates on keeping diverse elements in conflict. Using this type of reasoning may allow African Americans to include in their theology the ideas of many theologians and philosophers regardless of color; even to the point of including the aforementioned quote by a white man, who gave the lecture from which this quote was taken in 1925. African American theology must be in a constant state of revision and transformation. While there is an element of greatness in the religious dogma of the past, the African American theology that deconstructs and remythologizes the notion of God has equal greatness. With this idea firmly in place, the remythologization process can begin anew.

#### Implications for Further Study

All of the old myths about God need not be cast out. However they do need to be constantly juxtaposed to the conditions of contemporary society in order to determine the joint participation of God and humans in the world.

---

<sup>17</sup> Whitehead, Process and Reality, 338.

Remythologization is a continuing process. What is true, or at least rational about God's relationship and call to African American society today, may need to be re-thought in the future. Just as God is in a constant state of becoming, humans are also becoming in the events of God and the world. African American theology must be on a constant quest to determine this symbiotic relationship.

This study has indicated that the concept of ultimate truth does not exist in regard to God or theology. The truth is perspectival. The continuing task of the African American theologian is to constantly search for the truth about God from the perspective of the African American community, while remaining open to all other theological perspectives.

No theology can be done outside of a cultural context. The African American context calls the African American theologian to address issues that were not even thought of ten years ago. How is God calling the African American community to respond to aids? How is God calling African Americans to respond to drugs in their community? Does God call for counter-violence or self-defense or neither in the face of police brutality in the African American community? To what positive elements of the African American community is God calling us to respond? Each generation will provide different answers. Neither the Bible nor white orthodoxy are sufficient to address these questions adequately. African

American theology must not be static. Remythologization realizes that African Americans have lived for too long in an environment where questioning seemed inappropriate. The basic idea of remythologization that this writer calls for provides the basis and permission for continued questioning.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books

- Barclay, Wade Crawford. Early American Methodism, 1769-1844. Vol. 1. New York: Board of Missions and Church Extension, Methodist Church, 1950.
- Barth, Karl. The Word of God and the Word of Man. Trans. Douglas Horton. New York: Harper, 1957.
- Bracey, John H., Jr., August Meier, and Elliot Rudwick, eds. Black Nationalism in America. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970.
- Bultmann, Rudolf. Jesus Christ and Mythology. New York: Scribner's Sons, 1958.
- Cleage, Albert B., Jr. The Black Messiah. New York: Sheed and Ward, 1971.
- Cone, James H. A Black Theology of Liberation. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1970.
- \_\_\_\_\_. For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1984.
- DuBois, W. E. B. The Negro Church. Atlanta: Atlanta University Press, 1903.
- Edwards, Rem B. Reason and Religion. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972.
- Garnet, Henry Highland. "An Address to the Slaves of the United States of America." Black Nationalism in America. Eds. John Bracey, August Meier, and Elliot Rudwick. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970.
- Jones, Lawrence N. "The Black Churches: A New Agenda." The Black Experience in Religion. Ed. Milton C. Sernett. Durham: Duke University Press, 1985.
- Jones, Major. The Color of God. Macon: Mercer University Press, 1987.
- King, Martin Luther, Jr. Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community? New York: Harper and Row, 1967.

- Lincoln, C. Eric, ed. The Black Experience in Religion. Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press, 1974.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Martin Luther King, Jr. Rev. ed. New York: Hill and Wang, 1984.
- Livingston, James C. Modern Christian Thought. New York: Macmillan, 1971.
- Long, Charles H. "Assessment and New Departures for Study of Black Religion in the United States of America." Assessment and New Departures for a Study of Black Religion in the United States of America. Ed. Gayraud S. Wilmore. Durham: Duke University Press, 1989.
- Mays, Benjamin. The Negro's God. New York: Atheneum, 1968.
- McGiffert, Authur Cushman. Protestant Thought Before Kant. New York: Scribner's Sons, 1951.
- Meier, August, and Elliott Rudwick. From Plantation to Ghetto. New York: Hill and Wang, 1970.
- Mitchell, Henry. Black Preaching. New York: Harper and Row, 1979.
- Muzorewa, Gwinyai H. The Origins and Development of African Theology. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1985.
- Paris, Peter J. The Social Teaching of the Black Churches. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985.
- Raboteau, Albert J. Slave Religion. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978.
- Roberts, J. Deotis. Black Theology in Dialogue. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987.
- Soper, Edmund Davis. The Religions of Mankind. New York: Abingdon Press, 1921.
- Washington, Joseph R. Black Religion. Boston: Beacon Press, 1964.
- Whitehead, Alfred North. Process and Reality. Eds. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne. New York: Free Press, 1978.



- \_\_\_\_. Religion in the Making. New York: Macmillan, 1961.
- \_\_\_\_. Science and the Modern World. New York: Free Press, 1925.
- Williams, Chancellor. The Destruction of Black Civilization. Chicago: Third World Press, 1974.
- Wilmore, Gayraud, Jr. Black Religion and Black Radicalism. 2nd ed. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1986.
- . "The Case For a New Black Church Style." Church in Metropolis, Fall 1968; reprinted in C. Eric Lincoln, ed. The Black Experience in Religion. Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press, 1974.
- Wright, Nathan, Jr. Black Power and Urban Unrest. New York: Hawthorne Books, 1967.
- Young, Henry James. Hope in Process. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990.
- Young, Josiah U. Black and African Theologies. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1986.

#### Periodicals

- Jones, William. "Theodicy and Methodology in Black Theology: A Critique of Washington, Cone, and Cleage." Harvard Theological Review 64 (1971): 541-57.
- Popkin, Richard H. "Hume's Racism." Philosophical Forum 9, nos. 2-3 (1974): 218.

#### Unpublished Sources

- Jones, William. "Process Theology: Guardian of the Oppressor or Goad to the Oppressed? Insights from Liberation Theology." Manuscript, November 1985, School of Theology at Claremont, California, 12.
- Rogers, Cornish. Personal interview. 15 November 1989.
- \_\_\_\_. Telephone interview. 21 November 1991.